Interview with Ruth Ziebarth, daughter of Ruth Powderly Helm, Navy nurse to Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Warren Harding. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, Washington DC, June 28, 1999.

What do you remember about growing up in a home that had Navy people, your father being a Navy physician and your mother a nurse?

Oh, it's hard to say because you know so many of these things have been repeated in the family over the years. You hear stories about this and stories about that.

My direct memory probably goes back to Boston where my father was at the naval hospital and we lived on the grounds there. And my brother was born when we were living up there.

So you remember Boston? Was it at Chelsea?

Chelsea Naval Hospital, yes. Yet my brother was born at Massachusetts General Hospital.

And not in Chelsea?

And not in Chelsea, even though my father was the executive officer or the CO of the hospital.

Did he not have faith in Navy's medical system or what?

Maybe they had friends at Mass General in OB. I don't know because my sister and I were both born at Garfield Hospital here in Washington.

Well maybe they didn't provide maternity care at that time.

They may not, I don't know. But I do know each one of us was born in a private hospital, not in a Navy hospital.

So your father was the executive officer of Chelsea at the time?

Yes. I don't have the records in front of me, they're upstairs but yes he was one of the officers. He had a house on the grounds and we were there for 2 or 3 years.

And what was his name?

Jesse B. Helm. He left the Navy as a captain in the Medical Corps. I think he was probably a commander at that time.

And when did he join the Navy?

About 1913 after medical school. He went in as a . . . I believe they called it a past assistant surgeon.

That's correct.

Does that sound right?

Right.

I think that was his initial rank, and he served from 1913 until 1940 when he was retired. Not that he wanted to be because he was retired on physical. He had hoped to stay.

So he spent World War I in Haiti on a gunboat and then on duty in Port-au-Prince. We had a. . . I think we had what an incursion with Haiti at that time. I think the Navy and the Marines.

I think 1914 is when we went into Haiti.

Well then we kept troops.

And we stayed there for awhile.

And so he went in with that. After World War I, he went with the fleet and spent 2 or 3 years in the Mediterranean and on the continent.

Then he was sent to Brooklyn Naval Hospital and that's where he met my mother who was sent to Brooklyn on duty after she finished at the White House. They were married 2 or 3 years later when my father was transferred to Nicaragua with the Marines.

She was transferred to Port-au-Prince, Haiti with the Marine group there. And then she left the service and went over to Nicaragua. And he met her at the ship and they were married and lived there for a year and a half.

They were married in Nicaragua?

Yes.

When was that?

February 24, 1928. Her ship arrived in Corinto. They were married in Corinto. There was a military chaplain there. There was an American consul. And the Archbishop of Leon.

The archbishop of. . .?

Leon. Leon is a city in Nicaragua, near Corinto. I have been told by my uncle that they were married three times that day. I think they enjoyed Nicaragua very much, loved the tropics. Then she came back here before I was born.

My father then was transferred to *Saratoga* (CV-3) as the flight surgeon, and served on the *Saratoga* up and down on the West Coast until he was transferred to Boston. So from Boston we went to Cuba--Guantanamo. He spent 2 years down there and then up to Newport, back to Washington and then from there to Norfolk Navy Yard. And that's where he finished out his career.

Most of all I remember the East Coast. I don't remember Bremerton or San Diego, or Long Beach or any of those.

Do you remember anything about Chelsea, what that was like or were you pretty young?

Those are early memories. I remember that at Christmas time there was always a sleigh with Santa Claus coming up the long driveway, up the hill to the officers' quarters at the top. And I'd be in the window looking for Santa Claus.

That is a vivid memory, playing with friends up there. And then Cuba is much clearer.

What do you recall about Cuba?

Well, Cuba, we were there for 2 years. I started school in Cuba. That was a lovely place as far as I was concerned. I think that it was also a lovely place for my parents. I think they enjoyed the other people there although it was isolated.

You had a little island--not quite an island but almost an island--that you were living on. And this is where you lived and worked and socialized. Everything is right here in this tight little square but it was great for us. We enjoyed it thoroughly.

Swimming every day down at the... I think I mentioned to you that we have movies. My father bought a 16mm Kodak movie camera, I think in 1934, and he took movies of us and of life on the base during the whole time we were down there.

My brother in-law put the movies on videotape. He has the originals but I have the videotapes. He put them on videotape and had somebody else make a copy. And you know you get copies down the line.

Copies of copies of copies.

That's right, so that mine are not real good. And of course it's old, old film, it's 60 some years old. But they're fun for us. We all enjoy them.

Did you leave the base? In those times before Castro days you could go around the country. You could see other parts of Cuba couldn't you?

Oh yes you could. My parents frequently went across. . . I don't know if you know that area but there's a little town called Camaguay outside of Santiago. They would go over there from time to time. I don't know if they had dinner but they had some get-togethers over there and they'd have the captains gig take them over and pick them up and bring them back.

When we left Cuba. . . My father had the car shipped over to Santiago and we drove through the island all the way up to Havana and picked up the boat in Havana. He particularly wanted to see the interior of Cuba.

So life growing up in this type of an environment was very different from it. There was gentility about it.

There was gentility. I think life in the 30's among everybody was a slower paced and a more leisurely life style. And people were nicer to each other but I think especially in the service there was gentility.

What do you remember about your mother talking about her service as a nurse?

She talked about it more when I was older, in least in my recollection. When I was younger, when I would be present, she would talk about it occasionally to a friend, one of her close friends or a nurse friend.

You mentioned Sue Dauser last week. Sue Dauser and she kept up a friendship. And I believe just before Miss Dauser went out to California, she came over and spent an afternoon and they chatted and visited.

I wasn't present for it but I'm sure that they talked about their common experiences at Harding's bedside, but I was not there so I can't in any way make any references to it. But they did keep in touch.

Did she ever talk with you either at an early age or later about why or when she joined the Navy?

She joined the Navy at the beginning of World War I. You had to join the Red Cross because the Red Cross was the vehicle for servicing the Army and Navy Nurse Corps at the time. She went into the Red Cross with the thought of going into one of the services, so that she could go to the war.

She wanted to go to Europe to treat the soldiers, take care of the soldiers who were being hurt back then during the war. And she was assigned to the Navy. Some of the Navy nurses did go over but she was not selected. She complained about it but they didn't respond to her.

I should say they didn't respond positively to her because they did not assign her to foreign duty and she was not happy about it. She wanted to go over.

Where did she serve during the war?

She was initially sent out to Mare Island--Vallejo. I think we had a naval hospital on Mare Island at the time. And she worked there for part of the year. And then she went down to San Diego and she was there until probably the middle of 1918, maybe June of '18, and then she was transferred to Quantico. And from Quantico she was transferred probably in 1919 to the Navy dispensary. And then she spent 1919 to 1925 at the Naval Dispensary on duty there. From there she went to Brooklyn Naval hospital where she met my father then went to Port-au-Prince, Haiti and served there until she left.

Where was she from?

She was born in a small town in Pennsylvania near Scranton called Carbondale. It's a little coal town up in the coal mine region.

I know where that is. My grandfather had a hardware store in Edwardsville, which is right near Scranton. He had a mining supply and sold mining goods.

She was from a large family. Her father had died when she was young. Her mother was very limited in what she could do except she could sew, she could cook, and she took care of the family.

My mother's uncle lived here in Washington and was a political appointee. He was the commissioner of immigration at the time was very, very protective of my grandmother after my grandfather died, and very helpful to all the children. And one by one he arranged for the girls in the family to come to Washington to get jobs.

So, as they became 17 and 18 years old, the first one came down and went to nurse's training. The second one came down and went into office work. The third one didn't come to Washington because she wanted to be a teacher, so she stayed at home.

The next one was my mother. She wanted to come to nursing school but, because there was already a nurse and office worker and a teacher in the family, she was to be the seamstress. That's the way they did things in those days.

So her mother sent her to the neighbor lady who was a seamstress to learn sewing. My mother absolutely hated every minute of it. Finally, my uncle prevailed upon my grandmother to let her come to Washington. So she came down and went to nursing school here at Garfield Hospital.

At the time she came, both of her older sisters were here. They were living at my uncle's house, which is a huge house over on the other side of town in what we call Petworth. It is a big, big house--17 rooms. He had room for his sister to live there, for his nieces to live there.

And of course that's where my mother made her home. And that was her home until a few years before she married. But by that time my grandmother had come to Washington and the whole family bought a house.

Where was Garfield Hospital?

It was at 13th and Sherman Avenue, between 11th and 13th on Sherman Avenue, Vermont Avenue, north of U Street, Northwest.

Now that's Northwest still?

Northwest, yes. It was north of U Street. It's gone. It was a block or so from Central High School. I think they now call it Cardozo High School. At that time it was a very, very popular hospital, a good staff of doctors.

It went on then to become part of the Washington Hospital Center along with Episcopal Hospital.

Do you remember your mother talking about her being transferred to the White House to take care of the president?

President Wilson. President Wilson was stricken when he was traveling and brought back to the White House. Admiral Grayson saw how sick he was, knew that he was going to need around-the-clock care and requested nurses from the dispensary to be assigned to the White House.

And he didn't specify which nurses. She was selected by whomever was in charge of BUMED and reported to the White House and to Dr. Grayson along with several other nurses because they had to cover . . . I think they did 12-hour shifts. And they had to cover each other, spell each other. It turned out as time went on--this was probably at least October 1919, from the records that I have--that she stayed there until the Wilsons left the White House in March of 1921.

During that time there were times when she was there for a week at a time without even getting home, even though her home was probably 20 minutes away and a driver could take her there. She didn't get to see the house and her family because the president needed her and Mrs. Wilson wanted her there. There were other nurses coming and going but Mrs. Wilson wanted her there and gave her a room across the hall from the president. Her room was facing Pennsylvania Avenue. The president's was facing the Ellipse back in the Southwest corner. There's a picture of it in here. That was heavy duty and she was very happy to be relieved of it, very happy to get back to the dispensary.

Did she ever talk about her specific duties and the president's condition or any of that?

No.

She never did?

No. And if she had talked about it, I wouldn't remember it specifically enough to even comment because that is such a touchy subject as you know. Mrs. Wilson has been criticized; she's been vilified. Sometime she's been acclaimed for having helped run the country. Who knows? I don't know.

I know only that my mother had tremendous respect for Mrs. Wilson and for Dr. Grayson. And I think those are the two who were closest to the president at that time. I

understand that even his valet sometimes couldn't come into the room when Mrs. Wilson and Admiral Grayson were there.

I do not know anything except that she held Mrs. Wilson in highest respect. She found her a lovely lady and Mrs. Wilson reciprocated. She was very fond of my mother.

You showed me that wedding present she sent her.

Yes, in the dining room--a silver vase, which is inscribed from Mrs. Wilson as a wedding gift with their wedding date and then on the other side are her initials. It's a lovely gift. Then when Mrs. Wilson wrote her memoirs she sent a copy of it to my mother and inscribed it to my mother. And I think I showed you that. I Xeroxed some of the pages from that memoir referring to my mother.

She also gave her a picture of President Wilson, which she inscribed because, of course, he couldn't do it. As you know, he was paralyzed. And I don't think he did any writing, certainly not after he was sick.

Mrs. Wilson kept in touch with her. And when my mother died she wrote a note to my grandmother expressing her sympathy.

Did they ever get together personally in that time or just corresponding?

They may have gotten together briefly. I don't remember. I can't say that there were visits back and forth. Now my mother did keep in touch with Dr. Grayson and she and my father kept in touch with him regularly, and visited him whenever they were in town.

The last time, I guess was 1934, before they went to Cuba. They visited at the house on Wisconsin Avenue. I believe Dr. Grayson was ill. He apparently had his lawyer there earlier in the day and while my father was there, he asked my father to witness his will. He knew he was sick and he died before they came back from Cuba.

But he lived up here off Wisconsin Avenue?

Yes. It's the main house for Sidwell Friends School. As you drive down Wisconsin Avenue towards Georgetown it's on your left and it's just past Upton Street. Just beyond that is Sidwell Friends. There's a large horseshoe driveway and a big fieldstone house and that was their home. There's a memorial to the Graysons--Dr. and Mrs. Grayson--in our little park back here. Their property went all the way back there at the time.

So she left the White House after Wilson's death?

No. She left the White House when Wilson left the White House.

Oh I'm sorry because he died at his house up on S Street.

He did. President Wilson went up to the Capitol as a courtesy when President Harding was sworn in and then he was taken directly to the house that Mrs. Wilson had picked out for them over in Kalorama. My mother was there to greet him when he arrived there at the house to settle him in his bed and then she left. She officially wasn't supposed to do that.

Did she have anything to do with the family after that? Did she visit the new house?

I don't know that. This would be 1921, March of '21, and she went back to the dispensary. Probably a year later Mrs. Harding became ill and she was sent back to the White House to take care of her.

She had a kidney problem, a chronic kidney problem.

A kidney problem, that's right. And my mother did not want to go. She protested. She said she had been there, done that. But she received her orders, so she was sent to take care of Mrs. Harding for several months.

At the White House?

At the White House.

So she would have worked with Dr. [Joel T.] Boone and Dr. [Charles E.] Sawyer.

Oh yes and knew them both. Dr. Boone was the Navy doctor. Dr. Sawyer was the Harding's hometown homeopath, who was brought to Washington to take care of their medical needs.

And then he was promoted to Brigadier general from nothing--from civilian to Brigadier General.

Yes, to justify his salary or room in the White House or whatever they gave him, I'm not sure. I know that he was around. I know that she didn't have a whole lot of respect for him as a medical man. I don't think Dr. Boone did, either.

No, he didn't.

So she stayed there for a time and then when Mrs. Harding was better she was sent back to the dispensary. Sometime in April 1923, or so the president called her and asked her to come to see him. I think that it might be at that time that he made her chief nurse because I know that that's one of the things that he did. One of the emoluments of her service that he gave her was a so-called presidential appointment as a chief nurse.

And at that time he told her that he was planning a trip to Alaska and he wanted her to go along. He said, "I can't pay you for what you've done for my wife but I would like to know if you would just come on the trip with us. It would be a vacation. We'll be gone for 2 months. You won't have anything to do but you'll be a member of my party and you'll enjoy all of the things that we do. I'm going to include you as a member of the party and just consider it my way of saying thank you because I can't do anything more than that." And it was while they were on the trip that he died.

She went on that trip with Sue Dauser.

Sue Dauser was attached to the *Henderson* (AP-1).

She was already attached to the *Henderson* so she wasn't selected specifically for the trip? She just happened to be on the ship.

No. The trip started in Washington in June right about now, 23rd or something of June. They went by train across the country. And they made the stops--the whistle stops--in the back of the train, waving, and speeches, and things like that--all the way across the country to Vancouver.

Vancouver is where, I believe, they picked up the *Henderson*, and the *Henderson* took them up the inside passage to Alaska. And then they got off and went further inland in Alaska. They then came back to the *Henderson* and came back down into San Francisco.

So that Miss Dauser's service at that time was only after they got out to the West Coast. I believe she was one of the nurses or the chief nurse on the *Henderson* at the time.

Yes, because I think you have seen the photograph. Did I give you a copy of the photograph or not? There's a photograph taken on the *Henderson* of the crew and Sue Dauser and your mother are sitting next to each other.

That wasn't my mother.

That wasn't your mother?

No. That picture is in Doris Sterner's book.

Sterner's book?

Right. And it's on the very same page in which she makes reference to my mother. And I know the picture that you talked about; you sent me a copy of it. And I sent it back to you with a note that that was not my mother in that picture. And I think I sent you a copy of a newspaper with a picture of her, a newspaper photo of her.

Yes. I vaguely remember that. That's a number of years ago now.

Yes, it was several years ago but, no, she was not in that photo.

That was ship's crew.

Yes.

I guess as part of the presidential party she wouldn't have been in that photograph?

Well, it's not my mother.

You obviously know what your mother looks like.

Yes, but it's not she. That was strictly the *Henderson* crew in that picture. But she was definitely part of the official party. She's listed in the Washington newspaper as one of the people going along on the trip.

Now Carl Anthony in his book [*Florence Harding: The First Lady, The Jazz Age, and the Death of America's Most Scandalous President*, (1998)] about Mrs. Harding makes reference to the fact that she was asked to go along on the trip to take care of Mrs. Harding.

He mentions your mother?

Yes, he has several references to her. He indicates that she went along to take care of Mrs. Harding. And I'm sure that the president had that in the back of his mind that if Mrs. Harding got sick while they were traveling, Miss Powderly would be there and she would be able to fill in as needed.

Well you will be interested to know that he was so concerned or they were so concerned about Mrs. Harding's health that they took along on that trip a casket with them.

Oh I didn't know that. No.

Dr. Boone's papers indicate that he actually took a casket along. I'm not sure they had it designated for her but the thought was she wasn't going to make it. She was the one they were worried about, not him.

Yes. That part I know. I know that they weren't worried about him.

Because she had this nephritis, which was very serious.

And she died, you know, shortly thereafter. Shortly, about a year after the president died.

She had several attacks of it and Dr. Boone was quite concerned about it. Sawyer was looking after her but Boone had no faith whatsoever in Sawyer's ability and he was looking after her. She trusted Boone more, and didn't want Sawyer to touch her. She would ask for Boone, which put Boone in a very delicate position because he was subordinate to Sawyer.

And Sawyer didn't want to be replaced.

No. He had a nice thing going and he knew it.

And when Mrs. Harding left the White House and went back to Ohio, she went to his sanitarium and I think she spent the last year of her life there. I think she died there.

In Sawyer's sanitarium?

Yes. Sanitarium, whatever that was, but that's where she spent the last year of her life and died there. And she died I believe in the Fall of 1924 because President Harding died in August of 1923. My mother came back from San Francisco on the train with the president's party and then went with Mrs. Harding to Evelyn Walsh McLean's estate, which is now McLean Gardens.

And Mrs. Harding stayed at the McLean's for a month or so and, for the first part of that, my mother was with her, I'm sure, with the indulgence of the new president because that shouldn't have been an official duty but Mrs. Harding requested it and President Coolidge authorized it. So she spent a week or two, more as a companion to Mrs. Harding than anything else.

Did she ever talk about her relationship with Mrs. Harding at all?

Oh yes, she was very fond of her, very fond of her and very fond of President Harding. She really enjoyed and liked the two of them very, very much. And then when Mrs. Harding died, she left her something in her will.

Now I have known this for years. I can't even tell you what it was she left her. I have notes here: "Write to Marion County Historical Society and get a copy of the will." I don't have a copy of the will so I don't know what it is but it's referenced in Carl Anthony's book. It's referenced in notes that my mother's sister gave me a long time ago and I have just never followed up on it.

But in between President Harding's death and Mrs. Harding's death, and that was a little more than a year, she was requested to come to President Wilson's home on S Street because he was desperately ill. Dr. Grayson asked the president if she could come up to the house and take care of him. So she spent the last week of his life taking care of him. That was January or February of 1924, something like that.

So she was with President Harding when he died, and then 6 months later she was with President Wilson when he died. Not very many people have had that experience.

That's true. Did she ever talk about Wilson's death and the circumstances of that?

Only that Dr. Grayson called her and asked her if she would come up to the house and take care of him. And I know that he told her that he was desperately ill and probably not going to survive. And Mrs. Wilson also wanted her to be there.

So about all I can tell you is that she took care of him. I don't think that he was even at the point that he could communicate very well. After his stroke he really never came back.

Yes, he was very ill.

Oh he was.

There are photographs of him in the carriage being taken for rides. And you just look at him and you know the man is --one side was paralyzed.

I think one side was affected; his speech was affected. Apparently his mind wasn't affected as far as they could tell. I know that my mother would bring him the newspapers in the morning. She'd tell me that sometime in the spring/summer of 1920, she would have the valet bring the president in a wheelchair and put him out in whatever they had as a solarium or sun room on the south side of the White House and let him enjoy the day and the sunshine and warm weather.

She said that one morning she brought the newspaper over to him and put it on his lap and the headline was: "Cox selected for President" -- the candidate for President for 1920. She said that he looked at it and threw it on the floor immediately. Obviously, he was displeased.

Whether he had hoped to be re-nominated for a third term or not it's hard to say but of course it was impossible with his health at that point. It just wouldn't have been possible. But her references to President Wilson related primarily to her duty in the White House at that time.

And she found it onerous, physically onerous. It meant lifting him, turning him--a lot of heavy work. And she always felt she had injured herself to the point that she felt it for the rest of her life.

Injured her back?

Yes, just in the lifting and turning him.

There was no other assistance?

Yes, but there were times I'm sure when. . .

When there was no one there but her and she had to do something about it.

Yes. And I think nurses run into that all the time. I know she didn't enjoy that duty. She did it because she was ordered to do it.

She found it much more enjoyable to be in the White House with the Hardings. Mrs. Harding was sick but she was getting better and it was easier to be with her. And of course the president was a very affable man, as you know certainly from history, charming, everyone loved him and she among them. She found him a very nice person, a thoughtful, considerate gentleman.

In [Carl] Anthony's estimation was far more capable then he's been portrayed in recent years. Well not even recent years.

There is some revisionist history going on with Harding. I pulled some clips out of *The New York Times* and one of the other papers just to put with my files. He wasn't really as bad as people think he was, as people have said he was. Now let's look at him again because he really did do some worthwhile things.

Yes, because he was only ranked one level below Grant.
Below Grant or one level above.

Somewhere below Grant.
Right down there at the bottom.

Did she talk about caring for him in San Francisco during that last illness?
Well, she talked about the fact that he seemed to be. . . She thought that he was not as healthy as he should have been on this particular trip going out West and then going up to Alaska. And there were times when he got tired, times when he should have been resting and he was out shaking hands and meeting people.

He had to stop in a middle of a speech, as I recall, and sit down or let someone else finish it, whatever because he just wasn't able to do it. He apparently was showing signs of heart involvement or blood pressure, high blood pressure. And I shouldn't even say that because I don't know what the medical indications were. But he certainly was not physically well, especially towards the later part of the trip.

And then when they were in Seattle, Spokane, Vancouver, supposedly he had some crab that disagreed with him and the press was told it was ptomaine poisoning. I think that probably was the beginning of the heart failure at that point because it was not poisoning.

That's been one of those rumors that's been around for years that he was poisoned. And it was the bad crab.
That story has been around that the nurses had poisoned him. And Mrs. Harding had many letters telling her that if she didn't have that Catholic nurse around her, her husband would be alive. And she showed the letters to my mother and said, "I just want you to know that I'm getting them, you'll get them at your house. Just remember this has been going on for years and it'll continue to go on. So don't pay any attention to it."

She had newspaper stories about it. It went on but there definitely were stories about being poisoned. Poisoned by Mrs. Harding was another one, poisoned by the nurse. So I'm sure he probably did get sick after the crab but it's probably coincidental rather than a ptomaine poisoning type of thing.

You say your mother was with the president literally when he passed away. She was in the room. What does she mention about that?
She was getting ready to go off duty. She had plans for dinner that night. This was somewhere around 6:00 or 7:00. She was getting ready to go off duty. I think Mrs. Harding had been in the room. Mrs. Harding walked out of the room.

My mother was putting the blankets or something on top of the president before she left. And she said he just had a good shake and shivered. And she said she knew that it was massive whatever it was. And she said call Mrs. Harding. And Mrs. Harding looked and she immediately called Dr. Boone and all the doctors just went up.

And the president -- it was an immediate--you know what the term would be. I don't know what the medical terms are for this but he was dead. And there was no recourse at that time.

Dr. Boone mentions that he was not there in the building. He was outside. He had gone out to get a newspaper or something. He was out on the street when someone came running down the stairs and said the president is dead. And he was shocked. He went upstairs and he tried to comfort Mrs. Harding. But he wasn't there when the president died.

No. No, he wasn't.

Was it a massive heart attack or stroke?

Well they think it was a stroke. A cerebral hemorrhage is what you would call it.

Or a CVA, a cerebral vascular accident. A massive one.

And Dr. Sawyer, you know. . .

Never saw it coming.

No, never saw it coming and couldn't have done anything anyway. There have been references to medicine that Dr. Sawyer gave him. It may be in the Anthony book, medicine which may or may not have made his situation worse than it was. I think Dr. Boone's papers make reference to that. Anthony mentions that.

Boone and Sawyer didn't agree on much as far as the practice of medicine was concerned.

No.

There was a constant tension between the two of them. Boone would see something that Sawyer would do that he would not approve of and he would state his feelings about it and Sawyer would tell him to mind his own business, recognize his station, I think.

Yes, an "I'm the doctor" kind of thing.

I have a file on Sue Dauser. And I've never quite understood this but in later years when she was living in retirement in California and shortly before her death, she was interviewed about her career.

I have the newspaper story about it.

She talks about being there in San Francisco and taking care of the president and being there when he died. And that's the only reference I've ever found that she was actually on the scene. Apparently, it was your mother and not Sue Dauser who was on the scene when he died. But Sue Dauser doesn't mention your mother at all. It's glaring by the absence of the fact that she doesn't mention your mother.

I believe the interview you're referring to is 1966.

Yes.

I have a newspaper story about it that someone sent to me. My mother died in 1952. Sue Dauser knew that my mother had died. She knew that my mother's family was on the East Coast. She was on the West Coast. There would be no reference to Powderly or anybody else. And I don't even remember that there were very many books about Harding's death at that time.

There weren't many.

The first one was *The Shadow of Blooming Grove* and that didn't come out until, I believe, the early 70's. And I'm sure you've seen that. I have that one as well and I have the references to my mother in that book.

I believe that Sue Dauser was going to be the relief nurse and she would have been the night nurse going on at 7:00. And I may be wrong; I'd have to go back and check but I think that the Harding episode took place between 6:00 and 7:00.

And I know that my mother had dinner plans that night. She told me they were up on the 7th or 9th floor of the hotel, way up and she had to go to a friend of hers, a newspaperman and say, "Please get downstairs. Run down the steps and tell so and so that dinner is out. Dinner is out," which is what happened because she knew that there was no way that she could ever get out that night to meet her friend. That would have been impossible with all of that excitement.

Of the President's death?

Oh yes. But she knew there was no way that she could get downstairs to let him know.

So what about Sue Dauser?

I believe Sue Dauser was her back up. I think she was coming on duty at 7:00 that night. And I think she probably was on the floor getting dressed, putting her uniform on. They had probably already exchanged information about the medications. You know better than I, this is what nurses do. I've already given him this, this and this and 6:30 or 7:30 you're supposed to give him this and this. Well you know the routine.

And I have an idea that they had already gone through that. I can't say for sure but I know that Sue Dauser and my mother were good friends until my mother died. And I have no reason to think that anything untoward ever happened. She was an older woman at that point, if you remember. I don't remember how old she would have been in '66.

I want to say she was in her 80's.

That would make sense. My mother would have been 70 something.

It could just simply be an older woman who remembered that she was there and she was.

And she was.

Well, she says, and I have to refresh myself by looking at the clippings again, but I want to say that she said that she was the one that was in the room.

Oh I know she did.

And she doesn't mention your mother at all. When I had my chat with Milton Heller [Joel T. Boone's son-in-law] about this, before I knew about what you're telling me here, he talks about your mother being there. And Sue Dauser is not in the picture at all.

And I said to him well Sue Dauser was either in the room or she was close by, are you aware of that? And he said no. He wasn't aware of that.

He didn't know her name?

No.

And Dr. Boone's papers did not reflect that.

I asked him if he recalled seeing anything in Dr. Boone's papers that would. He said that he didn't recall seeing anything mentioned in Dr. Boone's papers about Sue Dauser. He said that he was going to go back and look.

And after he did, he said he couldn't find any reference to Sue Dauser, although there were plenty of references to your mother. So that's interesting.

Well, I do have the story. One of my mother's friends mailed it to me. In fact, she used to work for BUMED. And maybe somebody sent it to headquarters and then she made a copy of it and sent it to me. She had known Sue Dauser, too, and had been working there long enough to know her. And Sue Dauser to me is one of the highlights of the Navy Nurse Corps.

Oh, no question about it. She's above reproach.

Absolutely. She was the first woman captain.

Oh yes she is absolutely above reproach.

And it was probably through many of her efforts that women--that the nurses--received rank and kept rank that they were going to lose at the end of the war.

No question about it. I will attribute her omission to that of an older woman reminiscing about being with President Harding.

Just remember please, Mr. Herman, that you're talking to one because I'm going to be 70 pretty soon.

I consider you a youngster.

Thanks, dear. Well, I know the story that you're talking about from at least one newspaper that I read. And I know that that's what she said. And all I can say is that I'm sorry that Sue Dauser didn't say more, but I can only tell you what I know from my mother and from third parties because almost all of the references to the Harding death make reference to her--almost all of the newspapers. However, many of the newspaper stories talk about both Sue Dauser and Ruth Powderly attending the president.

Contemporary?

Oh, yes. Not necessarily in the room at the same time.

But attending. In the party?

No, not in the party. The difference was that my mother was part of the official party. Sue Dauser was a nurse on the *Henderson* and when he became ill on the *Henderson*, the captain--the medical officer--said "You stay with him, too, because he's going to need more nursing help." So she was officially a member of the *Henderson* on detached duty at the hotel in San Francisco for that time.

Where did your mother go after the Harding incident?

Well she came back here and stayed with Mrs. Harding at the McLean estate.

Then I suspect that she went home with the family and probably went up to Pennsylvania and spent a week or 10 days with the cousins just relaxing and visiting and so forth. But from there she went back to the dispensary. And then she stayed at the dispensary for almost a year until after President Wilson's death.

After President Wilson died in 1924, I know that she tried to get duty out of the dispensary, and they finally sent her up to Brooklyn to the naval hospital in Brooklyn. And she stayed there for 2 or 3 years until she was transferred to Haiti.

She met your dad there in Brooklyn?

She met him in Brooklyn. He was one of the medical officers at the naval hospital. I can't tell you precisely what his title was but he was one of the doctors at the hospital.

So I'm sure when he went off to Nicaragua they knew that they were getting married. And she tried to get duty in Nicaragua but they didn't have a nurse slot in Nicaragua. So she took the Haiti assignment and then took the ship around. They were married over there and had a lovely life in the Navy Medical Corps from 1928 to 1940. Between the wars it was a good life.

Of course your mother resigned then from the Nurse Corps upon marrying?

Oh yes.

That was the way it was. That was the rule.

Absolutely. You could not be married; you couldn't have a husband. You could be widowed or divorced but you couldn't have a husband and remain on duty. So she had to leave. She knew that.

So life as the daughter of a former Navy nurse and medical officer was quite a life?

Oh yes. It was lovely. It was for me I didn't know anything else. For my mother it was lovely because she had all the emoluments of being the wife of the medical officer wherever we were stationed. And I don't think they paid them a whole lot but they gave them a lot of perks, if you remember. I'm sure you've heard of the housemen and so forth.

The mess stewards and orderlies and all that. You mentioned something last week, was it last week when we were together? We talked about when your father passed away that your mother was in dire straits?

Yes, she was. My father had intended to open practice here after he had surgery but he didn't come out of his surgery. We were living in a rented house. My parents actually were looking for a house to buy so that they'd be settled. He was going to open his practice downtown. She was shocked and her life changed drastically after my father died.

She had no pension and there were no benefits. She had a little insurance and that was all. And she had to go to work because she had three little children. So she went out into the workforce as a nurse in the government at that time and stayed there. She continued doing that until she died.

That was a very heavy burden for her socially more than anything else. She became really a social recluse. She never wanted to see her friends from the Navy that she had known all

those years. She found it very difficult to adjust to life without my father. They were a very close couple, very devoted. It was very hard for her. And it was also hard because she was embarrassed about her financial situation.

She worked as a nurse then?

Yes, yes, a nurse in the government until she died so that she could take care of the family and see that we had an education.

You say that your father died before the war?

He died November 26, 1941, 10 days before the war started. So it was difficult.